Rudolph and Winchester

A micropaper originally posted to the AMS List: “Teleology for Advent”

No carol is more emblematic of Christmas in America than Johnny Marks's classic melody, *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*. It became no. 1 on the hit parade in 1949 when Gene Autry sang it, and it has remained a top favorite ever since.

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1                   2       3       4
Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer | Had a very shiny nose (^7) ||
I (Viennese sixth = ^6 app. maj. 9th) V
5       6       7       8
And if you ever saw it | You would even say it glows (^3) ||
V (^6 = app. maj. 9th) I
9       10      11       12
All of the other reindeer | Used to laugh and call him names (^7)||
I V
13      14      15      16
They wouldn't let poor Rudolph | Join in any reindeer games (^1).
V I
17      18      19      20
Then one foggy Christmas Eve | Santa came to say |
IV I V I
21      22      23      24
"Rudolph, with your nose so bright | Won't you guide my sleigh tonight?"
V64 cad. (= V) \V/V V
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Then all the reindeer loved him... (etc., like 9-16)

The pattern of melodic phrases is AA'BA', a very familiar shape in hymns and folksongs, and even in carols like *It came upon a midnight clear*. The pattern of semiphrases is regular dominant-symmetrical, I-V and V-I, which is also one of the most familiar through at least four centuries. In the B section, the harmonic rhythm accelerates, with a false closure beginning with the plagal IV-I at 17-18 and prolonged through the next two bars; this apparent slowing of the harmonic action makes the dominant six-four in bar 21 and the first appearance of a chromatic factor in bar 23 all the stronger, setting up the authentic half cadence at bar 24.

In the light of *Rudolph* during this season, I was hardly surprised to discover in another classic song a later incarnation of its essential tonal basis. In *Winchester Cathedral* we find a harmonic structure that differs materially from its American ancestor slightly in only two bars, and that additionally builds a more symmetrical harmonic rhythm supporting the upper melody; the phrase that follows is extended, fortified by this symmetry to the point where it prolongs the connecting cadence and makes the returning period even stronger harmonically.
The melodic pattern is likewise AA'BA', though unlike that of *Rudolph* the full sixteen bars of the A' section is repeated. The modern flavor in the harmony is reinforced by the abundant use of the Viennese sixth (root-position major tonic with added major sixth), which is harmonic in *Cathedral* where the melodic sixth degree in *Rudolph* is usually an appoggiatura to $^5$. The more important differences in *Cathedral* are in the B section, where the harmonic rhythm is built into an ascending-step sequence by dominant progression. In bars 17-18 there is as yet no hint that the tonic harmony is to become $V\text{IV}$, though by bar 19 the alert listener will suspect it. The arrival of IV at the end of the phrase is thus stronger for being postponed, and stronger still, as a resource of development, to yield via a chromatic shift to $V\text{V}$ at the beginning of the next phrase, bar 21. The dominant that arrives in bar 24 is not a half cadence so much as a connective cadence to the downbeat of 25 —— only the expect tonic is postponed again by the single bar, an extra bar extending the phrase so as to resolve at the beginning of bar 26.

By contrast with *Rudolph*, *Cathedral* is relatively impoverished melodically, with fewer strong motives (the five-note guitar figure at the end of each phrase, in most versions, provides a kind of echo) and a lack of clear connectibility between cadential points. But in its harmonic progression it is actually more unified and continuous than *Rudolph*, and this strength undoubtedly contributes to *Cathedral's* general appeal.

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